

# Empowering existing institutes holds the key to creating institutes of eminence

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Written by [C Raj Kumar](#), [Ashish Bharadwaj](#) | Updated: August 25, 2018



India must recognise that excellence leading to eminence is not just about governmental recognition, but ought to be the *raison d'être* of all higher education institutions. (Express Photo/Praveen Khanna/File)

In his 2016 union [budget](#) speech, the finance minister announced that an “enabling regulatory architecture will be provided to 10 public and 10 private institutions to emerge as world-class institutions”. This path-breaking initiative was widely appreciated. In early 2017, the UGC approved the guidelines for creating 20 world-class institutions that were renamed “institutes of eminence” (IoE). The outcome of the process that took more than two years was that out of over 900 universities, only six have the potential to become world-class universities. It is a damning indictment of the Indian higher education system in ways that the original policy clearly did not intend. The IoE process needs a fresh perspective.

Other than the UGC Guidelines (2016) and Regulations (2017), and statements by the finance and HRD ministers, the exercise to confer IoE status to 20 institutions was reiterated by Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) in a speech at the Patna University in October 2017. Based on these statements that expressed the government’s seriousness in creating world-class universities, one can’t help but reflect upon the legitimate expectations of the applicant institutions. In all, 114 institutions applied on the basis of a promise laid down in policies announced by the government. The terms of references under which the Empowered Committee was tasked to identify universities were not made public. The process of selecting the empowering universities was arbitrary.

Universities take decades to evolve. The attention should have been on empowering existing brown-field universities, rather than recognising non-existing universities as contenders. Institution building is about a deeper recognition of what it takes to build a culture of excellence. Lived experiences of individuals matter more in universities than in any other organisation. Even if there was a vision to recognise green-field institutions, there should have been a separate criteria and process to evaluate them. At a policy level, identical treatment of existing and green-field institutions was unfair and a grave mistake.

India is the only large country with no world-class universities that are globally ranked. Within a decade, there will be 14 crore youngsters in India hoping to enter a university. Only three Indian universities featured in the top 250 in the QS World University Rankings 2018, while just 11 made it to top 700. No Indian university features in the top 250 in the Times Higher Education World Rankings 2018 while only two have made it to the top 500. This is both surprising and embarrassing for a country with one of the largest academic systems.

There seems to be a paralysis in India's higher education system in not just policy, but also in procedure, planning and perspective. The task for the Committee should have been to simply select from the existing pool of universities and empower them to compete internationally. The Committee should have taken cognisance of the robust methodology that is used to rank institutions. Of course, research is of paramount importance. However, the key characteristics that are vital to any world-class university were missing from the exercise of selecting institutions. This includes, for instance, internationalisation of faculty, research, students, courses and outlook. Moreover, the selection process should have had a holistic approach to disciplines. By giving preeminence to the sciences and engineering, we have completely neglected the humanities and social sciences.

China's recent academic progress has been remarkable since it focused on supporting 100 research universities, many of which have achieved international stature. The QS considered 300 universities from India for ranking from among the 9,000 BRIC universities and 79 Indian universities were identified in the final BRIC rankings. It is disappointing that the Committee couldn't identify more universities from a list of those already ranked. It is important that the government unbundle the established methodologies of global ranking agencies. By selecting only six institutions, we have lost a historical opportunity to build world-class universities in India.

India has a lot to learn from the Asian experience. We must recognise that excellence leading to eminence is not just about governmental recognition, but ought to be the *raison d'être* of all higher education institutions.

Raj Kumar is founding vice chancellor, O P Jindal Global University. Bharadwaj is executive director, of the Office of Rankings, Benchmarking and Institutional Transformation (ORBIT), O P Jindal Global University